

**Public Health column for Independent Record
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What Your Mouth Says About Your Overall Health

If fear of a jack o' lantern smile isn't enough to get you brushing and flossing, then maybe this will: researchers are finding intriguing links between poor oral health and serious chronic disease.

In the past decade, an explosion of studies has shown important connections between severe periodontal, or gum, disease and a scary list of other conditions, including heart disease, pneumonia, diabetes, arthritis, liver disease, osteoporosis, and Alzheimer's.

Gum disease may even contribute to mothers having babies that are born prematurely at a low birth weight. These babies have an increased risk of poor health throughout their lives.

The American Dental Association (ADA) is quick to point out that studies so far have suggested an *association* between gum disease and chronic disease, not necessarily a cause and effect. That is, people who have periodontitis (the most severe form of gum disease) are more likely to have one or more of the chronic conditions mentioned above. We don't know at this stage whether one condition causes the other or makes the other worse.

Exploring the Connections

But researchers at the National Institutes of Health are now exploring how these conditions are related. One theory is that bacteria living in plaque release a steady stream of toxins into the bloodstream that can harm other parts of the body. The toxins provoke our immune system into causing chronic inflammation, which is known to play a critical role in many diseases.

Another theory is that shared risk factors – such as stress, certain medications, and smoking – contribute to an association between gum disease and other chronic conditions.

Severe gum disease can exacerbate existing heart disease and increase blood sugar, making it harder for diabetics to control their condition. And it may trigger increased levels of biological fluids that can induce labor in pregnant women, according to gum disease specialists.

Affecting 75 Percent of Us

Certainly the notion that good oral health may reduce our chances of getting chronic disease has public health implications because both gum and chronic disease are so prevalent. Heart disease is the number two killer of Lewis and Clark County residents after cancer, and 5 percent of adults in the state have been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. According to the Federal Drug Administration, three of four Americans over age 35 have some form of gum disease.

Given the potential link between oral health and overall health, it makes good sense to include brushing and flossing in our daily routines. Regardless of how healthy your eating habits are, or how diligently you exercise, you may put yourself at greater risk for serious disease if you don't take proper care of your teeth and gums.

The most obvious signs of gum disease are sore, red, and receding gums that bleed easily. Bad breath and tooth loss are also indications.

Those at the highest risk of gum disease are smokers, tobacco chewers, and people with diabetes, osteoporosis, or other systemic autoimmune diseases that compromise the body's ability to fight infection. Heredity can also be a factor.

You can also "catch" periodontitis from someone else who has the disease. Bacteria in the mouth can be transmitted through saliva – for example, by using another person's toothbrush.

Preventing Gum Disease

The ADA has these recommendations for preventing gum disease:

- Brush twice a day with an ADA-accepted fluoride toothpaste.
- Replace your toothbrush every three or four months. (An easy way to remember is to do it on the first day of every season).
- Floss or otherwise clean between teeth daily.
- Eat a balanced diet and limit between-meal snacks.
- See a dentist regularly for checkups and cleaning. If you do develop gum disease, your dentist can catch it early when it's more treatable.
- Let your dentist know of any medications you take or chronic diseases you have.
- Don't smoke or chew tobacco.

Finding Low-cost Care

If cost is keeping you away from the dentist, the Cooperative Health Center offers affordable, routine care on a sliding-fee scale through its dental clinic at 1930 Ninth Avenue. Adults and children can get regular exams, teeth cleaning, mouth X-rays, tooth extractions, fillings, and limited root canals. To make an appointment, call the dental clinic at 457-8928.

The health department also helps to coordinate "Give Kids a Smile Day," when local dentists donate their time to provide free dental care to eligible elementary school students. To learn more about this annual event, contact your school nurse.

Good oral health seems like a small price to pay for potentially better overall health. And these days, that's really something to smile about.